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United States Attorney
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NEWS RELEASE

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FORMER TREGO COUNTY SHERIFF INDICTED ON DRUG AND GUN CHARGES

WICHITA, Kan. — U.S. Attorney Eric Melgren and Kansas Bureau of Investigation Special Agent Kevin Campbell announced today the indictment of **Curtis L. Bender**, 37, Wakeeney, Kansas, former Trego County Sheriff, along with **Frank H. Casto**, 33, Quinter, Kansas, and **Steven C. Babcock**, 29, Logan, Kansas, by a federal grand jury in Wichita, Kansas, on February 10, 2003.

Melgren said that **Bender, Casto, and Babcock** were each charged with one count of conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute cocaine from March 22, 2003, through March 25, 2003, in Trego County, Kansas. **Bender** is also charged with two counts of distributing cocaine on March 22, 2003, and March 23, 2003; one count of attempting to distribute more than 500 grams (more than 1.1 pounds) of cocaine on March 25, 2003; one count of possessing a handgun in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime on March 25, 2003; and one count of possession with the intent to distribute cocaine on March 25, 2003. **Casto** is also charged with two counts of distributing cocaine on March 22, 2003, and March 23, 2003; one count of attempting to distribute more than 500 grams (more than 1.1 pounds) of cocaine on March 25, 2003; and one count of possessing a handgun in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime on March 25, 2003. **Babcock** is also charged with one count of possession with the intent to distribute cocaine on March 22, 2003.

A warrant has been issued for Bender's arrest. He is not yet in custody. Casto and Babcock have each been issued a summons to appear in U.S. District Court on February 25, 2004, at 9:30 a.m.

This investigation began approximately one year ago in March of 2003 when the Kansas Bureau of Investigation received a tip that Bender, while serving as Trego County Sheriff, was attempting to sell cocaine.

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The indictment alleges that cocaine was discovered in a seized 1994 Dodge Intrepid that had been sold at a sheriff's sale. The cocaine was subsequently discovered in the car and turned over to Bender, Trego County Sheriff, for destruction. The indictment further alleges that rather than destroy the cocaine, Bender retained the cocaine and distributed or attempted to distribute it in Trego and Ellis County, Kansas. Bender resigned from his position as Trego County Sheriff in April, 2003.

If convicted, **Bender, Casto, and Babcock** each face a maximum of twenty years in federal prison, without parole, for conspiracy to distribute cocaine. **Bender** also faces a maximum of twenty years for each count of distributing cocaine or possession with the intent to distribute cocaine; a minimum of five years and a maximum of forty years for attempting to distribute more than 1.1 pounds of cocaine; and a minimum of five years for possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime. **Casto** also faces a maximum of twenty years for each count of distributing cocaine; a minimum of five years and a maximum of forty years for attempting to distribute more than 1.1 pounds of cocaine; and a minimum of five years for possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime. **Babcock** also faces a maximum of twenty years for possession with the intent to distribute cocaine.

"Law enforcement officers hold a position of trust in our communities and that trust is rarely violated," Melgren said. "However, on those rare occasions when allegations arise of wrongdoing by a law enforcement officer, the allegations will be aggressively investigated and prosecuted. Those who uphold and enforce the law must abide by the law."

"This is an accusation and not a conviction, to be sure; but I must say I can imagine few greater betrayals of the public trust than a law enforcement official's involvement in drug trafficking," said Larry Welch, Director, Kansas Bureau of Investigation.